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# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Revital Hatuka. *Violent Acts and Urban Space in Contemporary Tel Aviv: Revisioning Moments*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. xvii + 228 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-72185-2; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-72882-0.

Reviewed by Noam Leshem (UCL Urban Laboratory)

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Commissioned by Colette Apelian

## Bloodstains on the White City: Tel Aviv's History of Violence

Tali Hatuka's *Violent Acts and Urban Space in Contemporary Tel Aviv: Revisioning Moments* aims to trace the relationship between the occurrence of violence and the locales in which it takes place. The political history of Jewish-Arab conflict in Tel Aviv provides Hatuka a prolific archive of recurring violence and a richly populated urban space, which stores over a century of grand national, ideological, and aesthetic ideals. Beyond its architectural space, Tel Aviv also embodies secular informality, mundane spaces, and daily practices that blur strict social and political conventions.

As Hatuka notes in her introduction, the book is not intended as a historical or political chronicle. Rather, it aims to examine how violent occurrences impact the physical production of space and the discourse about it. By coining the term "revisioning moments" the author explores the range of practices architects, real estate entrepreneurs, and official planning authorities used to mend the ruptured physical, social, and political fabric in the aftermath of a violent event. These practices involve both physical reconstruction and redevelopment of sites that experienced violent attacks, in addition to the discursive effort to enable and justify particular changes to the urban space. The aftermath of violence, Hatuka asserts, provides a unique vantage point to observe the opportunistic intervention of dominant political and ideological forces—primarily those serving the interests of the state and/or market—who seek to manipulate the post-crisis agenda to their benefit. Hatuka's criticism of architectural discourse is directed at the tendency to ignore concrete spaces and their reciprocal social relationships. This is an important and relevant contention that challenges the shield of professionalism surrounding mainstream architectural practice.[1] Unfortunately, almost absent from *Violent Acts* is a fine-grained analysis of lived spaces and concrete social practices that would support Hatuka's arguments and substantiate her concluding call

for utopian rediscovery of city space.

Both the introduction and the first chapter are dedicated to a theoretical and historical exposition. Hatuka employs an ambitiously broad disciplinary approach to the study of the city and violence, moving through and beyond Lefebvrian socio-spatial analysis, David Harvey's critique of spatial neoliberalization, postcolonial political theory, and trauma discourse. To ground the theoretical context(s), the book is structured around three central case studies. Chapter 2 focuses on the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Tel Aviv's Malkei Yisrael Square in 1995. The chapter charts the history of the square from the early twentieth century, analyzes the relation between ideology and spatial construction, and uses the planning debates in the aftermath of the assassination to probe the traumatic practices that still dominate this symbolic and physical locale. The 2001 suicide bombing at a seaside nightclub is the core of chapter 3 and prompts an analysis of urban boundaries and their transgression. The planned demolition of the seaside complex where the bombing occurred and the construction of a new development nearby provide an example of the neoliberal logic that governs planning procedures in contemporary Tel Aviv. A double suicide attack in Tel Aviv's Central Bus Station in 2003 is the focus of chapter 4. The chapter follows the history surrounding the Neve Sha'anani neighborhood, from the grand visions that accompanied its establishment to the more recent impact of migrant labor and global capital. The conclusion makes the case for a new approach from architects and planners in search of humane and just environments. It includes "A Letter to Architects and Planners," indicating the book's primary readership, though scholars with a regional or general concern with Israeli and urban politics may also find it interesting.

*Violent Acts* importantly seeks to point critical attention away from the urban spaces that have dominated

media coverage and scholarship of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict thus far, primarily Jerusalem and the Arab cities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. While a notable scholarly corpus in recent years has illuminated the role of architecture and planning in shaping and solidifying the Israeli occupation, there is a growing effort to explore the expression of ethno-national tensions in urban contexts that are not explicitly associated with "The Conflict." Haim Yacobi's book on Lod and Oren Yiftachel's work on the Beer Sheva metropolitan area are two examples of the broadening prism of Israeli spatial analysis.[2] Hatuka's work engages with the established historical scholarship of Tel Aviv and Jaffa. Her sources also include archival documents portraying the visions of the city's early planners and mayors, in addition to contemporary architectural plans and critical literature on the city's evolution.[3] However, what could have been an important historiographical critique of conventions governing previous historical urban analysis ultimately remains on the margins of the discussion, overshadowed by the author's preferred focus on socio-spatial theorizations.

Originally published in Hebrew, the English translation could have greatly benefited from a more scrupulous editing process that would have avoided unsubstantiated generalizations. The book states that the Israeli government invited foreign, non-Jewish immigrants to become residents of Israel (p. 143 and p. 151) when in fact workers were issued a working visa that lacked most of the social and legal protections of residency.[4] Likewise, anti-government incitement by religious right-wing leaders before the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin casts doubt over Hatuka's repeated claim that the killing violated "every written and unwritten Jewish code" (p. 29 and p. 58).[5]

In other cases, a lack of substantive evidence undermines some of the book's arguments. Central to Hatuka's criticism is the way violent events are discursively manipulated to reinforce existing socioeconomic discrepancies and dominant power relations. In chapter 3 it is asserted that terror attacks in the 1990s and early 2000s were "disconnected from local socio-spatial implications, [and] merely increased capital production, so that the violence in Tel Aviv actually furthered and legitimized urban development" (p. 118). While legitimacy is hard to measure, economic indicators clearly illustrate the tangible socio-spatial impact of terror. From 1996 to the height of the Second Intifada in 2003, unemployment in Israel shot to over 10 percent, poverty rates rose, and 72 percent of Israelis described their economic situation as "bad" or "very bad." [6] Urban growth in Israel was also clearly af-

ected, with an approximate 40-percent decline in annual construction between 1996 and 2005, not exactly the accelerated development Hatuka suggests.[7] Without such supporting information, the book is unable to fully concretize the relations between people and the spaces they inhabit.

Ironically, the project planned for the bombed nightclub was delayed for over a decade due to financial disputes between the developer, the municipality, and governmental bodies. At the same time, and contrary to Hatuka's claim that violent events "are unable to mobilize processes that foster social change" (p. 122), the deadly attack became a turning point in Israeli attitudes toward immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Many of those killed in the attack were young Russian-speaking migrants and the broad media coverage of their stories legitimized the community's entry into the imagined space of national sacrifice and loss. Readers unfamiliar with the identity maze of Israeli society would not gain much from the brief mention that "The funerals of the dead ... exposed the complex identities of the local population" (p. 116). What are these identities? What makes them so complex? Most importantly, what is the reciprocal relation between identity and the urban space in question? The book's focus on formal planning processes and powerful elites results in a missed opportunity to fully explore this resonant spatial intersection of ethno-national conflict and sociocultural identities.

The nightclub case is indicative of a broader problem in *Violent Acts and Urban Space*: the absence of a detailed sociocultural context. Another example is apparent in the discussion of the 2003 suicide bombings in the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station. Out of the entire chapter dedicated to the event and its aftermath, only the last section turns away from historical and theoretical recounting to deal with the actual practices residents and authorities employed in the neighborhood. The fragments of information Hatuka provides are fascinating, particularly the emergence of new communal spaces that foster greater public visibility for the disenfranchised communities of migrant workers who live in the area. But condensing this complex and intricate social and political arena into a brief five-page analysis, inevitably leads to generalizations. The neighborhood's diverse African, Asian, and South American communities, for example, are amalgamated into the abstruse category of "immigrant workers." This does not live up to the author's intention to present a multifaceted picture of the multiple voices and powers operating in the city (p. 169).

Other case studies in the book often refer to citizens

or lived experience, but little explore the heterogeneous and ambivalent manifestations of these terms. This is unfortunate, particularly because Hatuka is at her best when discussing the physical and spatial components that make up the urban fabric of Tel Aviv, bringing to the fore her experience as an architect, urban planner, and resident of the city. Her few tantalizing vignettes of daily routines vividly illustrate the unruly nature of urban life, not only in the extreme occurrences of violence and their relations to sphere of architecture and planning, but in the unexpected encounter of people and the built environment.

Hatuka's concluding hope of "enriching the discourse of space with a political and social consciousness" is true to her utopian belief in architecture as a healing and mediating force between regime and citizens (p. 172). Yet, fully humanizing the space of violence in a way that also opens new horizons of pluralistic engagement will require greater attentiveness to unplanned, pragmatic, and humble spatial practices that make up the daily life and fabric of Tel Aviv.

#### Notes

[1]. See for example the heated Makdisi-Gehry debate, sparked by the planned construction of a museum on the grounds of a Muslim cemetery in West Jerusalem, in *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 517-618.

[2]. H. Yacobi, *The Jewish-Arab City: Spatio-politics in a Mixed Community* (London and New York: Rout-

ledge, 2009); and O. Yiftachel, "Towards Recognizing Indigenous Rights? Beer Sheva Metropolitan Planning after the Goldberg Commission," *Tichnoon* [Planning], 11 (2009): 56-71.

[3]. See, for example: M. Azaryahu, *Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007); M. LeVine, *Overthrowing Geography: Jaffa, Tel Aviv, and the Struggle for Palestine, 1880-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); B. Mann, *A Place in History: Modernism, Tel Aviv, and the Creation of Jewish Urban Space* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); J. Schlör, *Tel Aviv: From Dream to City* (London: Reaktion, 1999). Some important untranslated Hebrew works include S. Rotbard, *White City, Black City* [*Ir levanah, 'ir shehorah*] (Tel Aviv: Bavel, 2005); and T. Berger, *Dionysus at Dizengof Center* [*Dionysus ba-sen'er*] (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz HaMeuchad, 1998).

[4]. Z. Rosenhek, "Migration Regimes, Intra-State Conflicts, and the Politics of Exclusion and Inclusion: Migrant Workers in the Israeli Welfare State," *Social Problems* 47, no. 1 (2000): 49-67.

[5]. I. Shahak, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), chap. 7.

[6]. M. Shamir and A. Arian, eds., *The Elections in Israel: 2003* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 3-4.

[7]. Ministry of Construction and Housing database, <http://www.moch.gov.il/Pages/data.aspx>, accessed June 13, 2011.

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